Character Education Evaluation Brief
Results of the 2003 Survey of School Administrators
February 2004

The Partnerships in Character Education Survey of School Administrators was designed to determine the nature and extent of character education initiatives in South Carolina and to gather information about how school administrators view character education and the attendant results in their schools. The survey was first administered in September 1998 and has been administered three times since, in October 2000, October 2002, and October 2003. This evaluation brief compares the most recent survey's methods and results to those of years past.

Section 1: Description of Respondents

Response Rates

On all four administrations, the survey was distributed to approximately 1000 principals, a near universal sample of public school principals in the state. Excluded from the mailing were child development and kindergarten-only centers, vocational schools, special schools, charter schools, and schools serving institutionalized populations. In addition, the survey was not mailed to schools that were in their first year of operation. **Table 1** provides a breakdown of response rates and percentages of districts and counties represented in each survey year. Over one-third of the surveys were returned on each administration. The respondents have been reasonably representative of schools in the state, with at least 90% of the districts and all (1998 and 2003) or nearly all (2000 and 2002) of the counties reflected in the responses.

Table 1. How many schools responded and how representative are they of the state?

Survey Characteristic	Survey Year			
	1998	2000	2002	2003
Total Distribution	1000	1036	1059	1043
Response Rate	37%	38%	40%	38%
Districts Represented	90%	91%	92%	91%
Counties Represented	100%	98%	98%	100%

School Type

As shown in **Table 2**, the distribution of school type among respondents was similar in all four surveys. Elementary schools have consistently accounted for the majority of respondents while return rates for middle and high schools remain about equal. These figures accurately reflect the breakdown of all public schools in the state, which in the most recent school year was: elementary schools–sixty percent (60%), middle/junior high schools–twenty-two percent (22%), and high schools–eighteen percent (18%).

Table 2. What types of schools responded?

School Type	Survey Year			
	1998	2000	2002	2003
Elementary	57%	59%	56%	63%
Middle/Junior High	22%	24%	22%	19%
High School	21%	18%	22%	19%

Respondent History

As mentioned above, approximately one-third of schools across the state have responded in each of the four survey years. In an effort to ensure that respondents represented a wide range of schools and not just the same schools year after year, program evaluators compared the number of first-time respondents at each survey administration to the number of repeat respondents. **Table 3** shows that while the majority of schools (80%) that responded to the 2003 survey responded to an earlier survey as well, new schools do continue to respond. As expected, the number of first-time respondents is getting smaller with each survey administration as more and more of the total number of schools in the state have responded to at least one of the four surveys.

Table 3: How many schools are first-time respondents and how many have responded previously?

Respondent History	Survey Year			
	1998	2000	2002	2003
First-Time Respondent	100%	54%	41%	20%
Responded Last Year		46%	43%	55%
Responded Previously, But Not Last Year			16%	25%

Section 2: Characteristics of School Initiatives

From the survey, we have learned about the types of character education initiatives in place, the planning processes that preceded the implementation of the initiatives, and the infrastructure that supports them. The survey data indicate that character education is becoming more predominant in our schools and that initiatives addressing the character development of students are increasingly multifaceted. In 1998, seventy-nine percent (79%) of respondents indicated that character education initiatives were present in their schools, compared to ninety-six percent (96%) of respondents in 2003. Not only has the percentage of respondents reporting the presence of character education in their schools increased, but there is accompanying evidence of increasing program sophistication as well.

Program Approaches

As shown in **Table 4**, numerous approaches are used to support character education in South Carolina schools. School administrators were asked whether the approaches listed in the table were used in their schools. The approaches used are displayed in rank order from most to least frequently mentioned by respondents. Daily or weekly character-related activities, special events, curriculum integration, and specific curriculum were the most often mentioned approaches among the respondents. Schools are slightly more likely to integrate character into existing curricula than to use a pre-packaged curriculum.

With just a few exceptions, the prevalence of each type of approach increased across the survey periods, and the percentage of schools using multiple approaches to character education increased as well. In 1998, sixty-six percent (66%) of respondents reported using three or more of the approaches to address character development, while in 2003, seventy-six percent (76%) of the respondents reported that their initiatives were based on multiple approaches.

Table 4. How is character development addressed in our schools?

Approach	% of Schools Using Approach			
	1998	2000	2002	2003
Daily/weekly character-related school-wide activities	63.6%	68.3%	78.0%	79.1%
Character-related events such as contests, assemblies, etc.	48.8%	64.9%	66.2%	69.4%
Curriculum units that integrate character development	59.8%	61.2%	70.1%	67.0%
Specific character education curriculum	44.0%	54.5%	53.7%	58.2%
Character-related activities that involve parents/families	41.2%	39.3%	48.8%	49.1%
Community-based character-related activities	30.9%	35.7%	39.9%	41.6%
Other approaches not listed above	11.7%	14.6%	15.9%	13.9%

Program Planning

School administrators were asked to indicate whether certain planning-related activities had contributed to the development of their initiatives. The activities are listed in **Table 5**, in rank order based on the frequency with which they were mentioned among the respondents. In all three years, the vast majority of respondents indicated that the initiatives in their schools were based on deliberate, comprehensive strategies for character education. While many respondents also indicated that their initiatives were part of a comprehensive district strategy for character education, the percentage of respondents who did not provide an answer for the item was unusually high on all survey administrations. Approximately one-quarter of the respondents in 1998, twenty-two percent (22%) of those in 2000, eighteen percent (18%) of those in 2002 and nineteen percent (19%) of those

in 2003 failed to provide an answer to the item that asked whether their initiatives were part of a deliberate, comprehensive district strategy to implement character education. Because school districts are required by state law to have a policy on character education, the high non-response rate to the item is troublesome and suggests a lack of leadership with regard to character education in some school districts.

Items on the survey questioned whether students and external groups such as parents and community representatives were involved in the planning process used to develop character education initiatives. Among these three groups, parents were the most often included in the planning process, while students were the least likely to be included. While student involvement in planning has increased substantially, it still only occurs in about half of the schools that respond to the survey.

Table 5. What planning precedes implementation of character education initiatives?

Planning Activity	% of Schools Using Activity			
	1998	2000	2002	2003
Development of a deliberate, comprehensive strategy for character education within the school	94.3%	95.5%	97.6%	97.2%
Development of a deliberate, comprehensive strategy for character education within the district	62.7%	70.5%	77.0%	74.4%
Solicitation of input from parents	61.2%	58.1%	74.0%	69.8%
Solicitation of input from community members	53.3%	52.4%	66.5%	66.3%
Solicitation of input from students	35.9%	34.7%	58.7%	54.5%

Program Infrastructure

On the 2003 survey, school administrators were asked whether various components that contribute to the character development infrastructure were present in their schools. The components are listed in **Table 6**, in rank order based on the frequency with which they were mentioned among the respondents. Addressing issues of character in the student handbook was the component most

frequently in place, being mentioned by eighty-five percent (85%) of the respondents. Eighty-two percent (82%) of the respondents indicated that character development is included in their School Improvement Plan. The presence of an honor code was the least likely component to be in place, occurring in only about one-third of schools.

More than half of the respondents indicated that technical assistance and training for teachers

support their initiatives. The South Carolina Department of Education provides some of that technical assistance; more than one-quarter of the respondents indicated that they had received technical assistance from the Department's character education unit. Seventy-eight percent (78%) of the respondents indicated that character-related training had been provided to teachers in their schools in the past year. On average, the training affected seventy percent (70%) of the faculty. Over two-thirds of the respondents indicated that they plan ways to communicate issues of character with the community, but less than half of them indicated that they seek to build community consensus about integrating character.

Table 6. What infrastructure supports character education in our schools?

Component	% of Schools Where Present
Addressing issues of character in the student handbook	84.8%
Including character development in the School Improvement Plan	81.7%
Planning ways to communicate with the community (e.g. parents, businesses, communities of character) about character	69.3%
Assessing results of character education efforts	63.1%
Providing character-related technical assistance and training to teachers	59.2%
Building community consensus about the elements of integrating character	46.8%
Addressing issues of character in athletic distributions	37.7%
Providing an honor code for students	35.1%

Section 3: Program Results

School administrators were asked if they believed that character education had produced positive results. The indicators they were asked to assess are displayed in **Table 7**, in rank order based on the percentage of respondents to the 2003 survey reporting improvement in each indicator. Student attitudes and behavior as well as school climate were the indicators most often reported as improving by respondents in all four years. Student and teacher attendance were the indicators least likely to improve as a result of character education. Nearly two-thirds of the respondents reported improvements in academic performance following the implementation of character education initiatives. We were not surprised to see these positive outcomes since these are the kinds of variables that character education programs typically address.

The proportion of respondents reporting improvements declined slightly on the 2003 survey. Because of comments written on some of the surveys, we believe that the decline can be attributed to a flattening in effects associated with program longevity. Nonetheless, the vast majority of respondents continue to report improvements as a result of their efforts.

Table 7: What improvements do school administrators report as a result of character education?

Indicator	% of Respondents Reporting Improvement			
	1998	2000	2002	2003
Student Attitudes	91%	90%	90%	86%
Student Behavior	89%	86%	88%	86%
School Climate	88%	88%	87%	86%
School Appearance	72%	74%	79%	73%
Teacher Attitudes	68%	62%	67%	62%
Academic Performance	62%	66%	66%	62%
Staff Attitudes	67%	61%	66%	62%
Student Attendance	37%	40%	42%	42%
Teacher Attendance	40%	37%	41%	38%

Section 4: Conclusions and Recommendations

The Survey of School Administrators has been an important tool for monitoring the progress and results of school initiatives addressing the character development of students in South Carolina. The upcoming addition of a grade for character development on school report cards will provide more complete data on how well school efforts conform to best practice for character development. The five dimensions of character development that contribute to the school report card grade are character integration, planning, professional development, assessment and evaluation, and school-community partnership.

All of these dimensions have been addressed to some degree by the survey, and a few areas of concern have been identified by the survey data. First, given the rising number of schools that are using a specific character curriculum, from forty-four percent (44%) to fifty-eight percent (58%) between the first and most recent survey administrations, it will be important to continue to emphasize the need to fully integrate character development throughout school life rather than simply teaching it during a few periods a week. In addition, school personnel must be encouraged to seek input from students, parents, and the broader community in the design and implementation of character development initiatives, and professional development efforts need to be provided to all school personnel, not just teachers. Finally, while approximately two-thirds of respondents indicated that they assess their efforts, and many reported improvements, the field would benefit from additional efforts to identify and replicate those initiatives that have met with measurable success.